

Review: Laura J. Shepherd (ed.), 2019: Handbook on Gender and Violence

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Lee Martin

Laura J. Shepherd (ed.), 2019: *Handbook on Gender and Violence*. Northampton/Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing. 480 pages. £155

Creating a handbook on gender and violence is no small feat. The subject matter is a comprehensive one and opens up questions such as *Is violence gendered? Is gender violent? How should we understand gender and violence in our world today?* In her attempt to understand the increasingly complex issue of gender and violence, Laura J. Shepherd acknowledges the limitations of such a handbook while explaining its importance in the ongoing debates surrounding the subject. In order to tackle the immense subject, the book is split into three sections; “Concepts”, “Representations” and “Contexts”.

In the first section, “Concepts”, the contributing authors reflect upon the tools that are used when discussing gender and violence. The first chapter explores concepts of gender and violence by highlighting that neither concept is easily defined, yet continuously linked. This idea runs like thread through the book, with further concepts and elements elaborating and complicating this link. Concepts such as race, intersectionality, sexuality, masculinity, patriarchy, femicide and security are analyzed as to how they relate to gender and violence, further broadening the field of research. By including these concepts in the discussion of gender and violence, Shepherd cleverly expands upon the notions of gender and violence.

The issue of race is discussed in chapter 3, where *Celeste Montoya* begins by discussing the gendered notions of certain types of violence, such as sexual violence or intimate partner violence, and emphasizing that by bringing together the concepts of gender and race in order to understand violence, we may gain a more complete and nuanced insight that is more than the sum of two parts. This notion is further explored in the next chapter which is titled “Intersectionality”, where *Lise Rolandsen Augustin* and *Emanuela Lombardo* begin by explaining the concept and its origins. The chapter further seeks to highlight the importance of utilizing an intersectional approach to the study of gender-based violence policies in order to expose varying power dynamics and the inequalities that are created by these intersecting systems, and the effects that these power dynamics have on individuals as well as policymaking. Many of the chapters mention previous concepts, linking them together while also allowing them to act as stand-alone inserts into the debate.

In the second section, “Representations”, the contributors engage with the notion of representation through discussions about gender and violence as a policy issue, feminist dilemmas and approaches, gender and violence on film, online, in the news media and photography. These chapters bring together some of the concepts which were introduced in the first section, and place them in various problematic situations. The first chapter in this section deals with the topic of gender violence as a policy problem, where language is seen as highly important in *how* the issue of gender violence is framed. The specific language or framing of a policy can either bring forth the gendered nature of a policy

or silence it, as well as locate the source of violence rather than only describing the underlying condition. Chapter 13 also deals with language in its exploration of narrating violence, where *Roxani Krystalli* aims to understand how our knowledge of violence changes when we take narratives seriously. In using stories shared by people in order to understand violence we can be seen to accept partiality and a possibility of a multitude of truths. This, the author states, is not anathema to feminist research, but rather a part of a feminist research ethic. The exploration and discussion surrounding the discomfort of using narratives within research is an interesting addition to the issue of gender and violence, where undoubtedly personal histories and stories are an integral part of the subject.

The common thread, representing violence and gender, is seen throughout and is well exemplified in the discussions of how gender and violence is presented in media, film and photography. In the chapter covering gender, violence and popular culture, *Andrea McDonnell* notes that pop culture can be understood as a ‘mirror’ reflecting social phenomena. However, we should rather view it as a distortion and exaggeration of our societies, where certain people and images are emphasized and others are ignored. In this sense, our ‘common sense’ understanding of representations is informed by a complexity of ideologies that are produced by cultural institutions, the media being one of them.

The third and final section, “Contexts”, places the issue of gender and violence in broader contexts in order to provide a more comprehensive overview of the link between the two and to exemplify the complexity of reconciling the two concepts with each other. The chapters range from discussing gender and violence within intimate partner relations, to peace and security issues, military and post-conflict settings. The first chapter of the section looks at transnational perspectives on gender violence by analyzing both opportunities and challenges that the field faces. By organizing and collaborating transnationally in working with violence against women, feminists have been able to participate in global politics in a new way. However, critics have also noted that this growing interest in women’s issues could hamper rather than enhance the radical potential of transnational organization. Will the mainstreaming of feminist analysis cause it to lose its critical edge? The last five chapters place an emphasis on gender and violence as related to legal systems in discussing economic violence, human rights, criminal justice, prosecuting gender-based violence and rape prevention. A common understanding within the chapters is the idea that violence is gendered and inextricably linked to gender identity and the body. Bodies are furthermore raced, sexualized, classed and (dis-)abled. Chapter 26 analyzes these connections and notes that how we relate to and understand violence depends on which of these bodies are enacting violence and in what contexts. Violence can be seen as both instructive and productive in the sense that it can be a way to perform masculinity or reinforce a hierarchy of masculinity and in doing so, show us ‘what it means’ to be a man, or a woman.

The discussion on prosecuting sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) on an international level clearly exemplifies the challenges faced currently in tackling gender-

based violence. *Dieneke de Vos* notes that although SGBV is nothing new within conflicts and war, they have remained invisible in international law, and sexual violence has long been viewed as merely an unfortunate side-effect of war. Although legislation now exists in order to prosecute for sexual violence within conflicts, there has not been a single successful conviction of SGBV. The complexity of prosecuting sexual violence, such as rape, is further analyzed and exemplified in the last chapter, in discussions surrounding rape prevention. This final contribution urges us to keep fighting against cruelty and fear and leaves the reader not only with new insights, but also with hope. The contexts described in this last section bring together the concepts and representations discussed in previous chapters and present the struggles faced today by individuals globally. One of the main strengths of the book is the ability to bring together a large array of authors and themes, successfully weaving them together in order to provide a cohesive and globally inclusive narrative of gender and violence.

In her introduction, Shepherd acknowledges that it is an impossible task to provide a comprehensive handbook on the subject of gender and violence. This is naturally true, as demonstrated in the *Handbook on Gender and Violence* it is a complicated and ever-growing field of research. Through the various contributors however, Shepherd has been able to piece together a diverse while also complementary overview of the field today. The various chapters, rather than only providing interesting theories and case studies, also largely discuss potential future areas of research. In doing so, the *Handbook* is able to place itself outside the realm of a static textbook read only for information. Rather it can be read as a source of inspiration for future researchers within the field of violence and gender, enabling the reader to gain an understanding of the various subject matters and to look ahead to see what is yet to be covered and how new areas may be developed.

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